

Rusk vs. the Committee—Again a Standoff

To present the proper example to the youth of America, Secretary of State Dean Rusk did not chain-smoke during his televised appearance last week before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

It was probably the only change that Mr. Rusk made, in habits or thoughts, for his long-awaited debate with a committee that often looks to the Administration like a dove cote atop Capitol Hill. The personal abstinence undoubtedly added to his ordeal.

Grilled on Vietnam

For 10 hours, over a two-day period, the Secretary endured a critical cross-examination of Administration policy in Vietnam. His inquisitors spoke from behind a shield of blinding lights that by the end had him bowing his head toward the witness table for relief.

Yet he never lost his Buddha-like composure. Occasionally he was obviously ruffled by the arbs that came from the committee critics. But the only sign of indignation, was a line of hair that rose on the back of his head, like the hackles on a barn rooster, when he crunched

his neck, poised for a riposte.

For months the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had been pressing for a public hearing on Vietnam policy. Mr. Rusk had been willing to accept the challenge. But the White House, remembering how the committee's 1966 hearings had started off the wave of criticism of Vietnam policy, ruled against sending the Secretary into another public confrontation.

A way was finally found to resolve the impasse that was threatening to break off communications completely between the Secretary of State and the Senate committee that is supposed to advise him on foreign policy. By custom, the Secretary testifies before the committee in public session on the foreign aid bill. With a public hearing thus unavoidable, the two sides entered into a tacit agreement that the foreign aid hearing would provide the forum for another public debate on Vietnam policy.

To both sides, the rematch proved to be something of a disappointment. At best it was a standoff, and on points scored on television screens across the country Mr. Rusk probably came out ahead.

But despite all his eloquence, Mr. Rusk's performance at times seemed like a television rerun of an old movie. For the most part, he restated his now well rehearsed arguments on the need to "organize the peace" of the world by demonstrating that aggression cannot succeed in Vietnam. Perhaps reflecting his weariness, he often restated verbatim arguments that he had made in past Congressional appearances, speeches and news conferences, to the point that some correspondents covering the hearings, were able to complete his statements before he had finished them.

Shifted Argument

Unable to resolve or even clarify their differences over policy, the critics tended to shift the argument to more solid institutional grounds involving the ill-defined constitutional right of Congress to be informed and consulted before any decision was reached to send additional troops to Vietnam. It was in this institutional sense of redressing the balance between the Executive branch and the Senate that the two-day debate is likely to

have its most constructive impact.

What the Senators — critics and supporters alike — were demanding was that the voice and advice of the Senate be heard before any major new decisions were made by the Administration. This reassertion of Senate prerogatives in the formulation of foreign policy put Mr. Rusk on the defensive in protecting the institutional prerogatives of the Executive branch. The only commitment he would give was that "if more troops are needed, we will, as we have done in the past, consult with appropriate members of Congress."

Such a commitment would seem to fall short of demands that the Senate, and the Foreign Relations Committee in particular, be formally consulted in advance of a decision. But as a practical political matter, the public confrontation is likely to force the Administration into closer consultations with Congress on Vietnam policy. The Congressional advice may not be heeded, but by closer consultation the Administration may at least defuse some of the Congressional criticism once the decision is made.